
Stop 52. Custer State Park

Arrival datetime: Tuesday, July 16, 6:00PM
Sites visited: Chimney Rock National Monument,
Agate Fossil Bed National Monument,
Wind Caves National Park, Custer
State Park
Accommodations: The Blue Bell Lodge
States traveled: South Dakota

We stopped at the Chimney Rock Visitors Center to see the video and the rock from a different angle. Then we stopped for gas. While Michael pumped, Jennifer went inside to see if there was something to buy for a picnic lunch. There was no good food, but she ended up buying five scratch-off Nebraska lottery tickets in order to get a free coffee-filled Nebraska travel mug. Michael played them and at first won a free ticket, then the free ticket won two dollars. So the coffee plus the mug only cost \$3 total.

We did get a picnic lunch eventually, but we were running late so we ate it while we drove to Agate Fossil Bed National Monument. We were a bit disappointed to find no connection to the word Agate in the fossils. It turned out “Agate Springs” was the name of a Ranch on which the fossils were found. The place had a nice nature trail, but at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the little signs that purported to describe plants growing in front of them had only dead stalks. The most interesting type of fossil was long and helix-shaped. According to the literature, scientists puzzled for decades over what type of plant or animal fossil it was until they discovered beaver bones intact inside

one of the structures. They have since decided the helix shape is formed by digging and the fossils are actually ancient beaver dens. We took some pictures but did not pause long. It was over 100 degrees again and even the mile loop through the fossil beds was pretty taxing.



Michael at the beaver den helix fossil.

In the air-conditioned auditorium at the Visitor Center, a nine-year-old boy

described the park features and introduced a film. We decided that child labor must be a farm-country phenomenon. We had heard that Nebraska actually outlawed corporate farming in order to make it possible for farm families to continue their way of life.

The film gave a good theory for why a lot of fossils seem to be found in small areas such as Agate. The animals probably died because of a drought. Animals feed near watering holes. Plants grow around the watering holes and the animals eat them. In drought situations, animals end up eating all the plants within the vicinity of a watering hole. They have to travel further and further away from the watering hole to get to the plants. Eventually, they need to expend more energy to get back to the plants than they get from eating. At some point, they rest near the watering hole and die there. So the watering hole fills up with bones that, under the right conditions, become fossils.

From the moment we crossed the border from Nebraska into Arizona, we thought we detected a greener look to the plains. Farmer's grassy fields were surrounded by trees. In general, there was more green in the scenery. The grassy farms turned to patches of real prairie, and we came upon Wind Caves National Park. No longer were there fields of planted grasses, but wild brownish grasses that waved in the wind, hid small prickly pear cactus, yet allowed sage and other brush-like shrubs to make room for themselves in the terrain. We had first seen something like it at Agate Fossil beds, but the vegetation there was so decimated by drought it did not fulfill what we now surmised to be its natural effect. We saw prairie dogs

hopping in and out of large, shallow dirt cones and scurrying among the grass.

We had had enough of spelunking, so did not go into Wind Caves. But we stopped for prairie dogs and buffalo and in general to appreciate the scenery of the prairie. We had plenty of time to make Mount Rushmore, but had gotten a brochure at Agate that said the best time to view the statue was morning. So we took our time getting to our lodge at Custer State Park, and stopped for buffalo sightings along the way.

When we arrived the lodge was experiencing a power failure. We were able to check in and shower but had no electricity. There was a deer head over a fireplace in our cabin, but it was otherwise extremely comfortable compared to the previous night's cabin experience. We went to dinner to find the restaurant closed for the duration of the power failure. We sat on the lodge porch and sipped cocktails for an hour waiting for the power to return, then gave up. We had some left over picnic lunch in the car and resolved to eat it for dinner. Yet we had no sooner settled back in the room than the power came back. So we went back to the restaurant and had a reasonable dinner.

We slept early and rose early in order to get the best views of Mount Rushmore. Driving out of Custer State Park, we saw our first Big Horn Sheep. They wandered



Wildlife at Custer State Park: prairie dogs, antelope, buffalo, big horn sheep, and wild mules.

alongside the road for ten minutes or so before moving across it into the forest. Then we saw wild mules do the same.

Miles traveled:	218
Arrival datetime:	Tuesday, July 16, 6:00PM
Departure datetime:	Wednesday, July 17, 8:20AM
Departure weather:	74° Sunny